

Bobbin Lace: a brief history

by Doris O'Neill

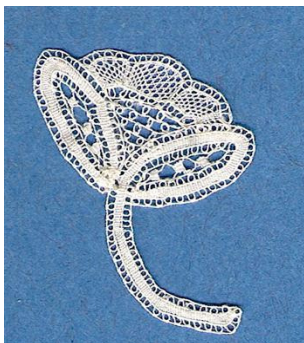
Samples of a few lace types



Torchon



Milanese



Honiton

Bobbin lace is now made chiefly by enthusiastic hobbyists. It is difficult to realize that once this skill had great commercial importance. All lace produced for sale between about 1500 and 1800 was either bobbin lace or needle-made lace, with bobbin lace eventually the preferred method. Lacemaking was such an important industry (second only to wool production in England at one period), that legislation designed to affect a country's export-import balance defined who could make it, who could wear it, of what threads it could be made (domestic or imported). Laws forbade lacemakers to emigrate, taking their lace secrets with them. The study of the history of lacemaking is in itself an absorbing hobby.

It is uncertain exactly where the two classic laces – bobbin lace and needlemade lace—originated: historians cite both Italy and Flanders as possibilities. Lace developed as a response to demand for trim for household linens and clothing: note the wonderfully complex laces seen in portraits by the great painters, Van Dyck, Rubens, Rembrandt, Franz Hals and others. Different techniques and motifs used in various towns and countries led to the naming of laces after the places where they were originally made—thus, Valenciennes, Mechlin, Honiton, Idria, Milanese, etc., etc.

The years 1750-1790 are considered the heyday of lace usage, with men wearing more lace than women. Dependent on the whims of fashion, handmade lace began its demise about 1800. At about this time, lacemaking machines were invented. However, it was the change in fashion which caused less demand for handmade lace.

The basic techniques of bobbin lacemaking are simple and easily learned: threads are twisted, right over left, or crossed, left over right. That's all. The fascination of the craft lies in the realization of the unlimited possibilities inherent in various combinations and repetitions of twists and crosses.

Bobbin lace is made on a firm surface or "pillow". A number of threads wound on sticks or "bobbins" are pinned



Bedfordshire



Buckspoint



Needlelace

to the beginning of the pattern. The lacemaker manipulates the bobbins, crossing and twisting them in what can be seen to be a weaving motion, using pins to secure each stitch. No knots are made. After an inch or so is worked, the pins can be removed: the lace is now a firm piece of fabric. Lace collars, lace pictures, lace edging for handkerchiefs, lace baby bonnets, lace wall hangings—an infinite variety of laces in fine or coarse threads can be created.

Bobbin lacemaking is truly part of American's ethnic heritage. Bobbin lace made in Ipswich, Massachusetts is included in a survey of American business enterprises in 1790 by then-Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton. Immigrants brought their skills and lacemaking equipment with them to America. Bobbin lace yardage made by descendants of German lacemakers from Bohemia settled in the Moline, Illinois area. Bobbin lace was one of the fancywork hobbies of women in the early 1900s. In addition, bobbin lace made by American Indian tribes from Minnesota, North Dakota, Wisconsin and California, taught by missionaries in the same era, survives in the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in the city of New York.

FURTHER READING

- Lace. Santina Levey. W.S. Maney, 1983.
- Lace. Virginia Churchill Bath. Henry Regnery Co., 1974.
- Twentieth Century Lace. Ernst-Erick Pfannschmidt. Scribner's, 1975.
- Lace in Fashion. Pat Ernshaw. Batsford, 1985.

Article, by Doris O'Neill, is intended to be a quick history lesson for demonstrators of lace. Written November, 2011.